

In the claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A system for accessing a surgical target site, comprising ~~the steps of:~~

~~a distraction system for creating a distraction corridor;~~

a handle assembly including a first arm member, a second arm member hingedly attached to said first arm member, and a translating member adapted to move longitudinally relative said first and second arm members;

a first retractor blade rigidly coupled to said first arm member prior to introduction into said surgical target site, a second retractor blade rigidly coupled to said second arm member prior to introduction into said surgical target site, and a third retractor blade rigidly coupled to said translating member prior to introduction into said surgical target site;

~~said a retractor system dimensioned to be received within said distraction corridor, said retractor system having a plurality of handle being configured to retractor blades simultaneously introduce said first, second and third retractor blades introduced into to said surgical target site in a closed position and thereafter opened by manually squeezing said first and second arm members relative to one another distraction corridor which are dimensioned to be simultaneously opened to create an operative corridor to said surgical target site.~~

2. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1, further comprising a wherein said distraction system includes a K-wire configured to be initially advanced to said surgical target site, and at least one generally cylindrical dilator configured to be capable of being slideably passed over said K-wire and secondarily advanced to said surgical target site, said at least one generally cylindrical dilator having an outer diameter slightly smaller than an inner diameter of said first, second and third retractor blades while in said closed position to perform said distraction.

3. (Currently Amended) The system of claim [[2]] 1 and further, comprising at least one shim element capable of being detachably engaged with at least one of said first, second and third plurality of retractor blades, said shim element having an extension of sufficient length to extend past a distal end of said at least one of said first, second and third retractor blades into a spinal disc space and of sufficient height to distract vertebral bodies adjacent to said spinal disc space.

4. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1 and further, comprising at least one retractor extender capable of being detachably engaged with at least one of said first, second and third retractor blades, said retractor extender having a width wider than said at least one of said first, second and third retractor blade to prevent the ingress of adjacent tissue into said operative corridor after said first, second and third retractor blades have been opened ~~a handle having a plurality of arm members, wherein each of said plurality of arm members are integrally formed together with a respective one of said plurality of retractor blades.~~

5. (Currently Amended) The system of claim ~~[[1]]~~ 2, wherein at least one of said K-wire, said at least one dilator, distraction system and at least one of said first, second and third retractor blades are equipped with said retraction system ~~includes~~ at least one stimulation electrode.

6. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 5, further comprising a control unit capable of electrically stimulating said at least one stimulation electrode, sensing a response of a nerve depolarized by said stimulation, determining at least one of proximity and [[a]] direction between said at least one stimulation electrode from at least one of said distraction system and one of said retractor blades to the ~~and said depolarized~~ nerve based upon the sensed response, and communicating said at least one of proximity and direction to a user.

7. (Original) The system of claim 6, further comprising an electrode configured to sense a neuromuscular response of a muscle coupled to said depolarized nerve, the electrode being operable to send the response to the control unit.

8. (Original) The system of claim 2, wherein said K-wire has a first stimulation electrode at a distal tip of the K-wire.

9. (Original) The system of claim 1, wherein said system for establishing an operative corridor to a surgical target site is configured to access a spinal target site.

10. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 1, wherein said system ~~for establishing an operative corridor to a surgical target site~~ is configured to establish said operative corridor via a lateral, trans-psoas approach.

11. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 6, further comprising ~~a handle coupled to at least one of said distraction assembly and one of said retractor blades, the handle having~~ at least one button for initiating the electrical stimulation from said control unit to said at least one stimulation electrode.

12. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 6, wherein the control unit comprises a display operable to display at least one of an electromyographic (EMG) response of [[the]] said muscle coupled to said depolarized nerve and a stimulation threshold of said depolarized nerve.

13. (Original) The system of claim 6, wherein the control unit comprises a touch-screen display operable to receive commands from a user.

14. (Currently Amended) The system of claim 6, wherein [[the]] said stimulation electrodes are positioned near a distal end of at least one of said K-wire, said at least one generally cylindrical dilator, and said at least one of said first, second and third ~~the initial distraction system and one of said retractor blades.~~

15. (Currently Amended) A method of accessing a surgical target site, comprising the steps of:

advancing at least one generally cylindrical dilator ~~creating a distraction corridor to~~ [[the]] said surgical target site;

thereafter advancing over said at least one dilator a retractor assembly including a first retractor blade, a second retractor blade and a third retractor blade releasably coupled to a hinged handle assembly while said first, second and third retractor blades are positioned generally adjacent to one another in a closed position; and

thereafter manually squeezing said hinged handle assembly to move said first, second and third retractor blades into an open position simultaneously introducing a plurality of retractor blades for retracting from said distraction corridor to create an operative corridor to said surgical target site.

16. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 15, wherein said step of advancing at least one dilator is preceded by advancing a K-wire to said surgical target site and thereafter slidably passing said at least dilator ~~creating a distraction corridor is accomplished by using a K-wire and at least one dilator capable of being slideably passed over said K-wire.~~

17. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 15, ~~wherein said step of simultaneously introducing a plurality of retractor blades including the~~ includes the sub-step of detachably engaging at least one shim element having an extension to [[with]] at least one of said first, second and third plurality of retractor blades after said first, second and third retractor blades have been advanced to said surgical target site and thereafter advancing said shim element such that said extension extends past a distal end of said at least one of said first, second and third retractor blades into a spinal disc space and distracts vertebral bodies adjacent to said spinal disc space.

18. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 17, wherein said at least one shim element is detachably coupled to said third retractor blade, which is ~~a retractor blade~~ disposed near the posterior region of the spine.

19. (Currently Amended) The method of claim 15, further comprising the step of performing neuromonitoring during at least one of the steps of advancing said at least one dilator, advancing said retractor assembly over said at least one dilator, and after said retractor assembly has been manually opened by squeezing said hinged handle assembly ~~providing a control unit capable of electrically stimulating said at least one stimulation electrode, sensing a response of a nerve depolarized by said stimulation, determining a direction from a surgical accessory to the nerve based upon the sensed response, and communicating said direction to a user.~~